

Joint Chiefs Demur

The public position of the Johnson Administration opposed negotiating with the Vietcong or recognizing them. A proposal for political compromise from Senator Robert F. Kennedy on Feb. 19, 1966 — that the Vietcong should be admitted “to a share of power and responsibility” in Saigon — had been quickly denounced by Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey. That, Mr. Humphrey said, would be like putting “a fox in a chicken coop; soon there wouldn’t be any chickens left.”

Mr. McNamara was skeptical that any approach would work rapidly. “The prognosis is bad that the war can be brought to a satisfactory conclusion within the next two years,” he told President Johnson in his memorandum. “The large-unit operations probably will not do it; negotiations probably will not do it.”

There are no indications that other agencies of government were called upon to comment formally, although the McNamara report did receive general endorsement from Under Secretary of State Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, who had gone with the Secretary of Defense to Saigon. A note at the end of Mr. McNamara’s paper stated: “Mr. Katzenbach and I have discussed many of its main conclusions and recommendations—in general, but not in particulars, it expresses his views as well as my own.”

The reaction of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Mr. McNamara’s proposals of Oct. 14, the Pentagon study reports, was “predictably rapid—and violent.” Obviously forewarned, the Joint Chiefs had their own memorandum ready on the same day for Mr. McNamara and the President. [See text, Joint Chiefs’ memo, Oct. 14, 1966.]

Their paper, quoted at length in the Pentagon study, agreed that a long war was likely but took issue with Mr. McNamara’s guarded assessment of the military situation, which, in their eyes, had “improved substantially over the past year.” They were especially concerned that the McNamara paper did not take into account what they called the “adverse impact over time of continued bloody defeats on the morale of VC/N.V.A. [Vietcong/North Vietnamese Army] forces and the determination of their political and military leaders.”

The Joint Chiefs objected to Mr. McNamara’s suggestion of a halt or a cutback in bombing to stimulate negotiations. The bombing, they argued, was a “trump card” that should not be surrendered without an equivalent return, such as “an end to the NVN aggression in SVN.” Rather than cutting back or leveling off, they advocated a “sharp knock” against North Vietnamese military assets and war-supporting facilities.

Whatever the “political merits” of slowly increasing the pressure, they said:

“We deprived ourselves of the military effects of early weight of effort and shock, and gave to the enemy time to adjust to our slow quantitative and qualitative increase of pressure. This is not to say that it is now too late to derive military benefits from more effective and extensive use of our air and naval superiority.”

Targets Are Specified

What the Joint Chiefs recommended in their Oct. 14 memorandum—and what they largely succeeded in getting President Johnson to approve, though only step by step—was a bombing program that would have these effects:

“Decrease the Hanoi and Haiphong sanctuary areas, authorize attacks against the steel plant [at Thainguyen] the Hanoi rail yards, the thermal power plants, selected areas within Haiphong port and other ports, selected locks and dams controlling water LOCs [lines of communications — canals and rivers] SAM [surface-to-air missile] support facilities within residual Hanoi and Haiphong sanctuaries, and P.O.L. [petroleum-oil-lubricants storage] at Haiphong, Hagia (Phucyen) and Cantho (Kep).”

The Joint Chiefs commented that Mr. McNamara’s proposal for total American troop strength of 470,000 men was “substantially less” than the earlier recommendations of General Westmoreland and Admiral Sharp. On Nov. 4, the study recounts, they recommended a build-up to 493,969 men by the end of 1967 and eventually to 555,741. They also discussed their preferred strategy, which involved the lifting of political restraints:

“The concept describes preparation for operations that have not as yet been authorized, such as mining ports, naval quarantine, spoiling attacks and raids against the enemy in Cambodia and Laos, and certain special operations.”

But at a conference of the allied powers in Manila on Oct. 23 to 25 came an indication that General Westmoreland had sensed that, as the Pentagon study puts it, “McNamara and Johnson were not politically and militarily enchanted with a costly major force increase at that time, nor with cross-border and air operations which ran grave political risks.”

The general’s talks with President Johnson on these issues “remain a mystery,” the Pentagon study says. But twice the general sought out Assistant

Secretary McNaughton, who reported to Mr. McNamara on Oct. 26 that General Westmoreland had trimmed his requests to 480,000 men by the end of 1967 and 500,000 by the end of 1968.

According to Mr. McNaughton’s report, cited in the study, General Westmoreland said that those forces would be enough “even if infiltration went on at a high level” but that he wanted a contingency force of roughly two divisions on reserve in the Pacific. This could range between 50,000 and 75,000 men.

The time for decision came virtually on the eve of the Nov. 8 Congressional election. Although the war was not a central issue in most districts, the Pentagon account says, President Johnson had obtained at the Manila meeting a statement on ultimate allied withdrawal that would favorably impress American voters.

The final Manila communiqué, issued on Oct. 25, pledged that allied forces would be withdrawn from Vietnam “not later than six months after” the other side “withdraws its forces to the North, and ceases infiltration, and as the level of violence thus subsides.”

According to Mr. McNaughton’s notes, “the President was determined to get the language in, including the reference to ‘six months’ (opposed by State, supported by me).”

No Sign of Discouragement

Three days before the election, Secretary McNamara said at a news conference at Johnson City, Tex., that the American troop commitment to South Vietnam would grow in 1967 at a rate “substantially less” than the 200,000 men added in 1966.

The Pentagon study says that the troop decision had been made in a meeting with the President that morning after weeks of detailed studies and arguments, but Mr. McNamara would give no figure to reporters. When they questioned him, he replied: “I couldn’t give you an estimate. We don’t have detailed plans.”

Nor did the Secretary give any indication of the discouragement with the war that had characterized his confidential report to the President on Oct. 14. Instead, he dwelt upon allied success in preventing the Communist takeover that had been expected a year before. Whereas in private Mr. McNamara had talked about the build-up of enemy forces and the American inability to energize the Saigon Government, in public he cited prisoner interrogations that suggested that enemy morale was sagging.

The troop build-up decision was formally communicated to the Joint Chiefs on Nov. 11. Mr. McNamara told them, the Pentagon study recounts, that the new goal would be 469,000 men in the field by June 30, 1968—not only fewer men than General Westmoreland’s revised figures at Manila but an even slower build-up than Mr. McNamara himself had foreseen in mid-October.

The Pentagon study asserts that the significance of the 1966 troop debate was that for the first time the President essentially said "no" to General Westmoreland. Moreover, Secretary McNamara, in his October memorandum, had generated alternative strategies to those put forward by the military commander. "From this time on," the Pentagon study comments, "the judgment of the military as to how the war should be fought and what was needed would be subject to question."

On Nov. 17, Mr. McNamara went a step further and challenged General Westmoreland's strategy of attrition. In a paper to the President, Mr. McNamara reported Pentagon calculations that previous American reinforcements had not brought sharp enough increases in enemy casualties to justify further heavy reinforcements. [See text, McNamara draft memo, Nov. 17, 1966.]

Pentagon efficiency specialists

showed, Mr. McNamara said, that from 1965 to 1966 "enemy losses increased by 115 per week during a period in which friendly strength increased by 166,000, an increase of about 70 losses per 100,000 of friendly strength. . . . We have no evidence that more troops than the 470,000 I am recommending would substantially change the situation."

Actual Losses Questioned

"Moreover," he went on, "It is possible that our attrition estimates substantially overstate actual VC/NVA losses. For example, the VC/NVA apparently lose only about one-sixth as many weapons as people, suggesting the possibility that many of the killed are unarmed porters or bystanders."

He made a similar report on the air war. "At the scale we are now operating, I believe our bombing is yielding very small marginal returns, not worth the cost in pilot lives and aircraft," Mr. McNamara said. "In spite of an interdiction campaign costing at least \$250-million per month at current levels, no significant impact on the war in South Vietnam is evident."

But President Johnson did not accept Mr. McNamara's earlier suggestions for a cutback in the bombing. The study reveals that the Secretary's pessimism about the war was not shared by such White House officials as Walt W. Rostow and Robert W. Komer, both special assistants to the President.

The one change in the air war that the President approved, the study shows, was an increase in B-52 sorties from 60 to 800 monthly, effective in February, 1967, as urged by Admiral Sharp and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

By the turn of the year, the air war had become the main point of controversy. Public dissent over the bombing was rising. Dispatches from Hanoi by Harrison E. Salisbury, assistant managing editor of The New York Times, generated an "explosive debate about the bombing," the Pentagon study adds.

"His dispatches carried added sting," the study explains, because he was in North Vietnam as the bombing moved in close to Hanoi. On Dec. 25, 1966, Mr. Salisbury reported from Namdinh that the air campaign had killed 89 persons and wounded 405 others. Press reports from Washington quoted officials as expressing irritation and contending that Mr. Salisbury was exaggerating the damage to civilian areas.

But soon, the Government's own intelligence specialists were privately estimating that civilian casualties in North Vietnam were far more numerous than indicated in the dispatches of Mr. Salisbury or of William C. Baggs, editor of The Miami News, who went later to Hanoi.

In January, 1967, the Pentagon ac-

count discloses, the Central Intelligence Agency produced a study estimating that military and civilian casualties of the air war in North Vietnam had risen from 13,000 in 1965 to 23,000 or 24,000 in 1966—"about 80 per cent civilians." In all, that meant nearly 29,000 civilian casualties in an air war that was to expand in the next 15 months.

The study reports that the total number of individual flights against North Vietnam in Operation Rolling Thunder rose from 55,000 in 1965 to 148,000 in 1966, total bomb tonnage rose from 33,000 to 128,000, the number of aircraft lost rose from 171 to 318, and direct operational costs rose from \$460-million to \$1.2-billion. But, paraphrasing the C.I.A. analysis, the Pentagon study comments that the bombing in 1966 "accomplished little more than in 1965."

According to the account, the major result of the raids close to Hanoi on Dec. 2, 4, 13 and 14—all inside a previously established 30-mile sanctuary around the capital—"was to undercut what appeared to be a peace feeler from Hanoi."

Effort to Arrange Talks

The Pentagon version of this diplomatic maneuver, code-named Marigold by the State Department, is reportedly included in the diplomatic section of the study, the one part not obtained by The New York Times. The authors of other sections relied on press accounts and on the book "The Secret Search for Peace" by David Kraslow and Stuart H. Loory of The Los Angeles Times.

The study recounts that the Polish member of the International Control Commission for Vietnam tried to arrange for talks between American and North Vietnamese representatives in early December, 1966, in Warsaw.

"When the attacks were launched inadvertently against Hanoi in December," the Pentagon study comments, "the attempt to start talks ran into difficulty. A belated attempt to mollify North Vietnam's bruised ego failed and formal talks did not materialize." This is an allusion to President Johnson's decision to restore part of the bomb-free sanctuary around Hanoi. The analyst does not explain why he considered the raids inadvertent.

Recapitulating the public furor over the bombing, the study comments that 1966 "drew to a close on a sour note for the President."

"He had just two months before resisted pressure from the military for a major escalation of the war in the North and adopted the restrained approach of the Secretary of Defense," the study continues, "only to have a few inadvertent raids within the Hanoi periphery mushroom into a significant loss of world opinion support."